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ABSTRACT

Noting that over the past decade incidents have occurred and new technologies have appeared which together have raised questions about the ethical values of American journalists, this Digest seeks to identify some of those ethical issues and to point to the work of those who have studied these issues. It addresses issues of plagiarism and corporate concerns, noting that with the growing consolidation of already large media corporations, pressure on journalists for biased coverage might be increasing. The Digest discusses media ethics and the new technologies, such as the ability to digitally alter photographs, and the proliferation of 24-hour news networks. It concludes with a discussion of media ethics and codes of conduct, suggesting that codes of ethics are ineffective means of securing good journalistic practices. (RS)

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# Issues in Media Ethics

*by Nola Kortner Aiex and Stephen S. Gottlieb*

Over the past decade, incidents have occurred and new technologies have appeared which together have raised questions about the ethical values of American journalists. This Digest seeks to identify some of those ethical issues and to point to the work of those who have studied these issues.

**Issues of Plagiarism and Corporate Concerns**

Recently, several journalists have had to answer charges of plagiarism or of fabricating stories–the most famous is Mike Barnacle, a veteran columnist for "The Boston Globe." Barnacle was eventually fired by his newspaper, but he later reappeared at another urban newspaper. Stephen Glass, a young editor/writer at "The New Republic," was discovered to have essentially made up more than 20 of his stories. Another young "New Republic" writer, Ruth Shalit, after two charges of plagiarism, has left the journalism profession to work in advertising.

With the growing consolidation of already large media corporations, pressure on journalists for biased coverage might be increasing. At the present moment, a movie, "The Insider," is receiving positive reviews but eliciting acrimonious discussion in the media about its veracity. Based on a true story, the movie tells the tale of a whistle-blower executive at Brown and Williamson Tobacco Corporation whose "60 Minutes" interview was held up by legal concerns among CBS executives and then watered down by its producers before it was finally broadcast. "The movie, as reviewers have pointed out, makes it seem as if this is a typical failing of "60 Minutes" and the media in general, rather than a rare exception," according to Etzioni (1999). Etzioni continues: "By substituting the media for pigheaded bureaucrats, corrupt politicians, and heartless gangsters as the villains 'du jour,' Hollywood both follows and reinforces public opinion trends."

**Media Ethics and the New Technologies**

With the 1980s and 90s came new developments in the manner in which information is presented to the public. Photographic methods improved, enabling newspapers and magazines to show to their readers images that reflected an "improved" vision of reality. But as is true of many new techniques and inventions, the advancements in photography raised ethical questions. Some of these issues were addressed by Reaves (1989). She explains that new computer processes permit editors to alter the content of photographic images. Colors can be controlled, and objects or people can be removed from or added to pictures.

Furthermore, if the changes are made carefully, they are virtually undetectable. To confuse the issue, negatives can be manufactured from an altered image to create "proof" that the photograph represents reality. The ethical issue is obvious: how far can photo editors take the alteration process while still purporting to present to readers a genuine image?

Reaves asked 12 magazine editors about their publications' practices with respect to computer enhancement of photographs. The editors unanimously claimed that they would refuse to apply the technique to news photographs. While the editors decried tampering with news photographs, however, most of them saw no ethical difficulty in adjusting the backgrounds of cover photographs to fit headlines and so on. Some also saw nothing wrong with deleting stray objects from pictures. Reaves found that non-news magazines freely adjust elements of photographs for the best possible presentation.

"New York Times" reporter Rick Marin muses about the new online journalism that has rapidly taken hold: "Old-media journalists measure their mettle in scoops and Pulitzers; new-media reporters and editors have another gauge of success or failure: hits. By counting the hits or, more accurately, page views, on their Web sites, online magazines can track not only how many people are reading them but also for how long people are reading any given article" (1999). Marin notes that some observers of journalistic ethics worry that the "instantaneous reader surveys will bend online magazines to the mercenary will of their business sides."

The explosion of cable television stations for every taste is another phenomenon of the 1990s. There are now several competing 24-hour news networks. Both CNN and the Fox News Channel flash "news" to the viewer at every moment of the day. Some of it seems to be questionable news from dubious sources. Newspapers often cite competition from television, but "this television carnival can spur serious print professionals to compromise their product." (Harrison, 1992). CNN and Fox both have weekly programs about media ethics questions. One scholar has cautioned media ethics analysts against mixing moral paradigms in assessing ethical behavior (Wuliger, 1991).

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**Media Ethics and Codes of Conduct**

What happens when a reporter derives personal gain or allows others to gain from his inside information about his organization's publication plans? Stories in the prestigious "Wall Street Journal" have frequently helped determine the success or failure of a business venture. During the 1980s, a "Journal" reporter was found to have contributed to insider trading by passing tips along as to when his paper would carry stories about firms. This event was mentioned in a thought-provoking article by Robert E. Dreschel entitled "The Legal Risks of Social Responsibility" (1987). Dreschel suggests that in such cases as the "Journal" incident, the existence of an internal policy or code of ethics could backfire on a news organization. In his view, a party alleging that a news organization has committed libel (or in the insider trading case, a government prosecutor alleging that a reporter has practiced insider trading) can point to the code of ethics as a standard of care for the organization. For example, if a newspaper's policy required double confirmation of facts, a person alleging that a story was printed in disregard of its truth or falsity could point to the lack of a second confirmation as "proof" of such disregard.

Dreschel identifies other risks inherent in ethical codes. If there were an industry-wide code to which most medium-and large-market radio news operations adhered, a small-market station might find it difficult or impossible to meet the standards set by the code. A city hall reporter in Boston might have no trouble in offering a public official the opportunity to deny an allegation of misconduct before the accusation is broadcast, if a code so required. However, a reporter in Smalltown, USA, who doubles as station engineer and afternoon announcer, facing time and resource constraints, could find it difficult or impossible to meet such a standard.

In "The Case against Mass Media Codes of Ethics," Black and Barney offer two major arguments against ethical codes for news reporting (1985). First, such standards are inconsistent with the notion of an unregulated press as envisioned by the First Amendment. As the authors suggest, protection of a free press is but a facet of protection of everyone's free expression. Each person best develops as an individual and citizen if he or she is free to obtain whatever information may contribute to that growth. Governmental control of the media, or even self-imposed regulations to which all reporters must comply, limits the flow of such information.

Black and Barney's second argument against ethical codes for the news profession emerges from the difference between what they label "moral philosophy" and mere "moralizing." The authors suggest that a genuine moral philosophy evolves within the reporter as that person gains experience. On the other hand, codes merely advise as to the industry's view of what is appropriate behavior. The codes remove the need for reporters to become what Black and Barney refer to as "professional philosophers" who are capable of making their own decisions about what is right and wrong.

In a later study, Black (1992) returns to the question of media ethics for journalism students, deciding that values inquiry remains an elusive and intriguing field of study, worth pursuing to discover the impact of instruction on students. In one media ethics course, for example, students analyze such topics as truth, falsehood, manipulation, temptation, unfairness, and power (Bugeja, 1997). Another scholar suggests that an ethical code that would be useful for journalists is one that stems from Judeo-Christian teaching. Considering persons as ends in themselves, this code would ask the journalist how he or she could best show love for the subject in question or the community (Wilson, 1995).

If codes of ethics are really ineffective means of securing good journalistic practices, what would work better? John C. Merrill offers one answer in the title of his essay, "Good Reporting Can Be a Solution to Ethics Problem" (1987). Merrill would set the standard of ethical journalism at simply expecting the reporter to write a good story. He would also call upon reporters to abandon the claim of objectivity for an admitted subjectivity which reporters constantly work to overcome.

Journalists themselves accept Merrill's view that objectivity equals ethicality, but they see objectivity as a reasonable goal. In 1985 when Merrill asked 50 reporters and 50 journalism educators whether an accurate story is an ethical story, 64% of the reporters agreed. Conversely, only about half as many of the educators took the same position. Almost all of the journalists had faith in the possibility of objective journalism, while almost all of the educators negated that possibility.

It is left for Etzioni to remind us that without a responsible media, there would be no dialogs and it would be difficult to come to a general agreement on a change of national direction. He also points out that, "unlike other professions–say, doctors and lawyers–the media are much more given to open self criticism."

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